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Social and Institutional Support as Perceived by Female Domestic Violence Victims Serving Custodial Sentence

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Abstract

A frequent reason for women remaining in harmful, abusive relationships is mainly fear of revenge, losing children, sense of guilt and erroneous conviction on abuse. Financial dependence and a lack of familiarity with forms of assistance and available support force a woman to remain in a disordered relationship, sometimes running afoul of the law. Sometimes it is the case that during yet another bout of abuse they reach for any object at hand and give a fatal blow to their torturer – the worst and at the same time the saddest scenario. Both options result in “the end” of one suffering – experiencing violence and the onset of another one related to serving a custodial sentence. In this article I would like to signal that some life paths combine those two awful experiences implying an absence of support of the immediate environment as well as of institutional support by entities whose responsibility it is to provide help.

Keywords: *support, domestic violence, victim, perpetrator, custodial sentence*

Introduction

One of the modern social pathologies deeply rooted in social reality is violence. In the post-war Poland social awareness of domestic violence against women was rather low. The 1990s became the breakthrough period with first research recognising this problem conducted in 1993. The following years saw, rather systematically, instances of domestic violence with the example of numerous diagnoses developed

by CBOS¹ – 1996, 2002, 2003, 2005, and by TNS OBOP² – 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, as well as the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 (<http://www.mpips.gov.pl>). The research reports show a growing number of women experiencing violence on the part of their partners: from 61% to 90% of all victims. This group constitutes the highest percentage of victims of sexual violence 90%, physical violence 63%, psychological violence 64% and economic violence 70%. Police statistics additionally complete the national data showing that in 2011 out of 131,546 domestic violence victims 70,730 were women, whereas in 2014 out of 105,332 domestic violence victims 72,786 were women (<http://statystyka.policja.pl>).

International reports also present alarming data. The World Health Organisation rings alarm bells regarding a global epidemic with 35% women in the world affected by domestic violence and 40% of all women killed were murdered by their partners (<http://www.who.un.org.pl>). Also Amnesty International reports that universally more and more women aged 15 to 44 die as a result of violence, more than due to illnesses or road accidents. This only shows how difficult it is to conduct a detailed and accurate analysis of this phenomenon and the presented data is only the tip of an iceberg.

Scientific literature presents many concepts explaining the pathological relations of a victim with the perpetrator of violence. The socio-psychological perspective constitutes a good example of a traumatic relationship showing a strong dependence of a woman on her partner. Such a concept is based on the assumption that physical violence may intensify a woman's need for love and feelings. Such motivation is strong enough to endure her partner's oppression. In abusive relations double addiction develops. The perpetrator needs a victim to control and master her. The punishment system introduced by the torturer is a good method to neutralise his partner's unwanted behaviours. Meanwhile, for the victim the tyrant constitutes the centre of her existence. She feels responsible for her partner in accordance with the traditional role of the woman and she treats the abuse as a form of domestic discipline – rationalising her torturer's behaviour.

¹ Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej – Polish Public Opinion Research Centre

² Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej – Public Opinion Poll Centre

Research Methodology

Research was conducted in the Penal Institution in Lubliniec at the beginning of 2013. The Prison is a closed unit with departments such as a detention centre, half-open and open type prison for women with a capacity for 230 prisoners (<http://www.sw.gov.pl>).

The main objective of the conducted research was to recognise the meaning the women – violence victims who serve a custodial sentence – attribute to social and institutional support. The research was particularly aimed at recognising the social barriers women encounter when violence is interrupted and help received in such a difficult situation. The main research problem was the question of the scope and character of social and institutional support available for women and the opinions and needs within that scope. Detailed questions focused on the familiarity with assistance institutions – the scope, services type, motives, circumstances of seeking help, reaction of the environment and its influence on further life of women enduring violence.

In order to obtain information necessary to carry out the research objectives, a non-categorised interview was applied. Research respondents were 11 women – domestic violence victims serving a custodial sentence for a variety of crimes as well as those who killed their torturer. All the research participants lived within the province of Silesia. The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 38. Most of respondents completed primary, vocational and secondary education. All of the respondents had at least one child aged 3 to 8 – one respondent had three children.

Forms of Violence Applied to the Respondents

The victims suffered from their partners/fathers the following forms of violence:

- Physical violence: beating, kicking, strangling – with the use of a number of tools: knives, cleavers, destroying household equipment (*poking, pushing over, severe battery once in two months*" K28³), (*"thrown out of the window from the 2nd floor"* A38);
- Psychological violence: humiliating, offending, insults, ridiculing, threatening, blackmailing – verbal abuse (*"failure to utter a name for a year"*, *"insults, belittlement"*, *"perpetrator presents himself as a person wronged by others and thus forces daughter into loyalty"* K28),

³ K28 – the name initial and age of respondent

- Sexual violence: rapes and forcing to perform sexual activities, (*touching, molesting* K28, *“fulfil the woman’s marital duties”* A38);
- Economic violence: full financial and residential dependence (*“husband preferred me looking after the house and the child (...) our financial situation was very good”, “husband owned the house”* A36).

All the women participating in the research experienced physical and economic violence. Also all of them financially depended on their torturers. Only two respondents were forced to sexual relations – partner, father. A significant aspect is the fact that for all the female respondents their partner’s violence started some time after the beginning of their relationship (after the birth of the second child, 8 months into her relationship, 2 to 5 years into their marriage or upon reaching physical maturity). Leonore Walker confirms that the most characteristic feature of violence perpetrators is apparent normality non indicative of violence use (Walker, 1979) – maintaining their image – charming, likeable, manipulating others with ease (Vaselle-Augensteini, Ehrlich 1992, p.140).

Strategies of Handling Violence and Forms of Defence

Specialists dealing with support and help are convinced that the actions of persons experiencing violence are bound within a rather limited repertoire without a real opportunity to interrupt violence.

The respondents’ other activities included:

- talking to the violence perpetrator – the women attempted to emphasise its pejorative aspect, indicating the unfavourable influence, thus evoking the sense of guilt in their partner. The manner of talking varied, sometimes they were short several-minute discussions, while some were lengthy monologues or preaching. With time the female respondents abandoned such behaviours in the absence of visible improvement or because it was an additional argument to use violence against them (A19, K27, E30, D29, M27, A36, A38). Most frequently, violence perpetrators did not want to undertake any talks. Some denied the facts while others treated it as a form of justification of their behaviour (shifting responsibility).
- demanding promises – when talking to their partners some women tried to achieve a promise to discontinue the use of violence against them – a promise made did not cease violence (E30, A38, A36, S29, D29).
- threatening – the women often tried to threaten or blackmail their partner (*“calling the police, moving out of the house or revealing the domestic*

situation”) unless they stopped the violence. Such a threat was perceived by the partners as “empty words” and their illusory nature influenced the effectiveness – an argument to close their victim’s mouth (S29, A36).

- hiding from the torturer – a strategy applied during a direct attack aimed at providing oneself with a “*relative feeling of safety*” – “*hiding in another room, running out of the house*”. In the opinion of the respondents it was hardly effective – most frequently it escalated the situation or resulted in more severe consequences – “*no possibility to return home for some time, destroyed property or vandalised joint property*” (A38, A36, A19, M27, D29).
- avoiding – the women were of an opinion that if they avoided discussion, provocation, stayed out of the way of their partners, they would become “*less visible*” and the violence would stop. Unfortunately, the result was the opposite, it became an argument for the use of violence (A38, A36, K28, M27).
- active defence – two female respondents were aggressive towards their torturer. Such a reaction was unplanned. When attacked they tried to stop the perpetrator with all possible means. In their opinion, it was an act of desperation at the moment of hazard to their or their child’s life in the subjective perception of the respondents. Most frequently, the consequence of such active defence is a fatal blow taking the life of the torturer (K28, A36).

Received Help Evaluation by Female Respondents

Help is the fundamental human act constituting the expression of social solidarity (Szluz, 2006 p. 123). It is a specific form of care for another human, understood as cooperation with the subject in a difficult situation (Dąbrowski, 2000, p. 66), providing them in diverse manners with one’s own resources – information, good word, financial or material means (Otrębska-Popiołek, 1991, pp. 10–17).

Whereas social support in a behavioural or process-like aspect is identified with assistance behaviours as a form of meeting the needs by significant persons (Sęk 1997, p.147). This is a form of social interaction, where information, emotions, operational tools or goods are exchanged. A form of a system between the supporter and the recipient of support develops. Such an interaction should head towards problem solving and the guarantee of effectiveness of activities is, first of all, appropriate help, adequate to the recipient’s needs (Sęk, 1986, pp.791–799).

The female respondents’ familiarity with assistance institutions was poor. Social care was the most often recognised institution, which appeared in the social

benefits category and the customers of the so-called underclass (a stereotype contributing to failure to use this form of help among the female respondents). Meanwhile, half of the women participating in the research had contact with the police – most frequently as a telephone call to report the domestic situation during a violent attack – with police intervention as an effect. In the opinion of the female respondents it was the least effective form of help – poor competences of police officers (lack of knowledge of the phenomena of violence, problem with differentiating between a family row and violence, lack of readiness to undertake action – sobering-up centre in the instance of an intoxicated aggressor). Following police contact once or twice the female respondents abandoned the use of such a form of help considering it ineffective.

In the instance of non-professional support, the vast majority of the women participating in the research did not receive any aid from their immediate environment or it was inadequate to their needs and expectations. Types of support according to Helena Sęk (Sęk, Cieślak, 2011, pp.19–20) include:

- emotional support: messages they received most frequently had hardly anything in common with emotional support: *“you need to bear it for the benefit of the children, the family”* (A19, E30), *“children must have a father”* (A36, A19, M27), *“you will not manage on your own”* (A19, A36, S29, K27, D29), *“life has its worse moments”* (A19, S29, A36, M27), *“you are not the only and the last one”* (A19, A36, S29), *“I have been there and I am still alive”* (E30, M27), *“clench your teeth and carry on”* (S29).
- information support, the so-called cognitive support: the female subjects were frequently presented only the consequences of undertaking any activities aimed at revealing the violence suffered – within the context of institutions or other people. On numerous occasions, bleak scenarios were presented should they attempt to leave their partner/husband: *“taking the children away”* (A36, A19, S29, K27, D29), *“break-up of the relationship”* (A36, S29, A19), *“loneliness”* (E30, K28), *“shame”* (A36, A19, M27), stigmatisation – *“underclass”* (A19, S29, A36).
- instrumental support, which is an exchange of information on specific manners of proceedings, and providing proceedings instruments. The women participating in the research were informed about MOPS⁴ as a source of social benefits to support family without revealing the aspect of endured violence. However, no specific ways of solving the problem were indicated.

⁴ Miejski Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – Social Welfare Centre

- material support – offered to the majority of the female respondents under the condition that no activities were undertaken; only one woman could count on shelter when escaping or financial and material help.

Analysis of the collected material shows that the vast majority of the women participating in the research could not count on the support or help on the part of their immediate environment. Most often they experienced intimidation or blackmail. They were made to believe that such was the natural order they should adjust to. Very often during their attempts to undertake action they received a message – *“this is not the way”* or *“look at what you are losing”* or *“what will happen to you”*. In effect, the female respondents withdrew from undertaking any activity putting themselves at the mercy of their torturers. They abandoned talking about their problems, did not seek any further help at institutions or among their relatives, thus remaining in their abusive relationships. On numerous occasions the consequence of such a situation among the female respondents is prison for various crimes or killing their torturer.

Serving a custodial sentence in prison is not a convenient situation. Prison isolation limits personal freedom of a human being and forces them to submit to the binding rules. All of their existing activities are subjected to a sudden change and are brought to a subordinate-superior-inmate relation (Matysiak-Błaszczuk, 2010, pp. 44–45).

“Free time”, isolation from relatives, specific nature of the place allows them to make certain considerations concerning their situation in life. The women participating in the research analysed their situation from the time perspective and noticed certain phenomena and events in a slightly different light. Therefore, they may have a better understanding of themselves and the surrounding reality. Considering all the answers of the female respondents their situation in life may be divided into two periods:

- before getting to prison the women displayed dominance of the following:
 - Lack of knowledge of the phenomena of violence,
 - Lack of knowledge of their rights and possibilities of receiving help,
 - Lack of knowledge of assistance institutions: no unified or updated list of assistance institutions,
 - Institutional ineffectiveness – inadequate activities, inappropriate education of assistance institution employees – inappropriate reaction, lack of respect for the customer’s feelings, underestimating and failing to observe the problem and the customer’s needs, lack of individual approach – applying template procedures to all cases,

- Remoteness of assistance institutions – visible in rural areas and a limited assistance offer – poor institutional resources,
- Lack of support from relatives – inappropriate reaction or help of the immediate environment discourages from using professional institutional help.
- time of serving a custodial sentence:
 - Numerous programmes are carried out for convicted women:
 - educational and therapeutic programme for women with an alcohol problem,
 - educational and therapeutic programme for female victims of domestic violence (Aggression Substitution Training, Educational programme for female victims of domestic violence) (Marczak, 2013, pp. 354–356),
 - domestic budget management training,
 - educational programme within the scope of health promotion and prevention of contagious diseases and diseases of modern age
 - going through problems – with a psychologist, therapist,
 - education, gaining professional qualifications and their improvement, professional activation
 - stress, distress, separation from family (children).

The grounds of the gathered material show that both of those periods were not favourable times for the respondents. The period of distress, a fear for oneself and a child, helplessness and lack of support brought them to the place where they currently have to spend a part of their lives. Prison, which partially freed them from domestic hell, led them to the hell of a total institution. For the women participating in the research it is a difficult time they are not proud of, torn by the pricks of conscience, separation from family (children), a sense of injustice while waiting for the end of their penalty. However, even here apart from the dark side stemming from isolation (deprivation of needs, difficulties in handling the situation of the prison, limitations subject to legal provisions and the specific character of the institution) they may find several positive aspects (boost knowledge and awareness of those women, opportunity to participate in numerous therapeutic and educational programmes, personal development), which enable their reunion with “*normal life*”.

Conclusion

Female domestic violence victims who decided to seek support and help in their immediate environment or a professional assistance institution carry their personal baggage of experiences, diversified needs and expectations. At this moment a question may be posed on why support and help are so important? The answer is simple: support and help should be available to all persons in a difficult situation. It is a consequence of a person's belonging to a social network through satisfaction of needs by significant persons. Help and support increase readiness to undertake activities interrupting violence, enhance motivation to act even at moments of doubt or obstacles in life, interrupt further human tragedy – one does not enter the path of crime – including the killing of one's own torturer. The faith of the female respondents shows how much depends on the reaction of one's immediate environment and the first contact, which affects seeking further help. How important is patient, empathic listening, understanding, compassion as well as active encouragement to act and, if necessary, painful confrontation with tough reality (Bilska, 2012, p.).

Research shows that the biggest problem is a lack of knowledge (what violence really is – low social awareness of where and how to seek help), what the rights of every citizen are and institutional inefficiency – poor resources, inappropriate approach to the problem and to the customer. When undertaking activities, attention needs to be drawn to education, information and psychological activities addressed to an individual, society – raising awareness of what is violence and where to seek help. Development of a support and help system should be founded on the following principles: the principle of unconditional support for those suffering violence – effective countermeasures of help require a clear position condemning any forms of violence; the principle of respect for the decision of a woman – together with help as well as with developing an integrated institutionalised system of support it is important to consider the specific character of a relationship based on violence and its effects. Women seeking a way out of such a dramatic situation should not feel that someone else will make decisions for them. They should be in control of their destiny and persons involved in helping should respect the decisions made and not exclude further opportunities to use the offered forms of help; the principle of personalised approach – adjusting the forms and the scope of help provided to individual needs and possibilities of the customer and the principle of comprehensive help – the support and help programme should be comprehensive in nature and include activities which allow women to become independent.

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